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## The Unexpected Rewards of Qualitative Research in Assessment: A Case Example

Penny Singh

Durban University of Technology, pennysin@dut.ac.za

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## The Unexpected Rewards of Qualitative Research in Assessment: A Case Example

### Abstract

This paper reports on the inclusion of an oral component of assessment in science at two tertiary institutions in South Africa. The purpose of this paper is not to report on the results of the assessments conducted, but to focus on some of the unexpected rewards of conducting qualitative research in assessment. Using focus group discussions within a qualitative framework allowed me insights into the thoughts and experiences of the students and assessors, making the benefits of oral assessment apparent. These benefits included how assessment can be used as a learning opportunity, the advantages of homogeneous versus heterogeneous groups, and the benefits of face-to-face interaction, all of which led to improved relationships between students and assessors.

### Keywords

Action Research, Assessment, Focus Group Discussions, and Oral Assessment

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## **The Unexpected Rewards of Qualitative Research in Assessment: A Case Example**

**Penny Singh**

Durban University of Technology, Durban, South Africa

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*This paper reports on the inclusion of an oral component of assessment in science at two tertiary institutions in South Africa. The purpose of this paper is not to report on the results of the assessments conducted, but to focus on some of the unexpected rewards of conducting qualitative research in assessment. Using focus group discussions within a qualitative framework allowed me insights into the thoughts and experiences of the students and assessors, making the benefits of oral assessment apparent. These benefits included how assessment can be used as a learning opportunity, the advantages of homogeneous versus heterogeneous groups, and the benefits of face-to-face interaction, all of which led to improved relationships between students and assessors. Key Words: Action Research, Assessment, Focus Group Discussions, and Oral Assessment*

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### **Introduction**

I used questionnaires and focus groups of undergraduate students and assessors to evaluate oral assessment structures devised for assessment in tertiary Science in South Africa. These discussions focused on the strengths, weaknesses, and effectiveness of methods employed in the South African tertiary classroom, and sought to gauge student and assessor responses to oral assessments and mixed-mode (a combination of the oral and written modes) assessments in science.

Usually when one thinks about assessment, one immediately conjures up images of numbers, calculations, and all things quantifiable. My dilemma with this study was how to present my findings in a way that would make a tangible difference to the world of assessment. Sure, I could use statistics, graphs, t-tests, and other quantitative methods of analyses to convey my findings, but, would these findings reflect my richest source of data? Would it reflect the thoughts, feelings and opinions of all the participants in my study? Determining the success of the method of assessment used could be gained from a study of student results, scoring by the assessors, assessor bias and all the other related factors, but it would not inform me or the reader of the opinions of the participants. After all, it was the participants that had first-hand knowledge and experiences of the process under scrutiny, and in my opinion, it would be a waste to ignore this wealth of data. I therefore, had to weigh the option of qualitative against quantitative research carefully.

### **Qualitative or Quantitative Research?**

Elliott (1991) believes that “quantitative methods, which are designed to produce aggregated data in depersonalised and decontextualised form, appear to constitute the perfect solution to the ‘insider researchers’ dilemma” (p. 64). The researcher is able to produce data that would be quantifiable and unbiased, as they generate “public knowledge” which de-personalises the data.

According to Colon, Taylor, and Willis (2000) qualitative research emphasizes “participant observation” whereas quantitative methods rely on the “research instrument through which measurements are made” (p. 2). Weiler (2001) adds that if teachers want “deeper understandings of their students and their learning,” they will not be able to achieve this through quantitative research--they will need to be “intimately involved” in the process (p. 415). Qualitative research would provide this opportunity. As Labuschagne (2003) says, “qualitative data provide depth and detail through direct quotation and careful description of situations, events, interactions and observed behaviours” (p. 1) or what Jones (1997) describes as “empathetic understanding” (p. 3). Winter (2000) concurs that while “quantitative research limits itself to what can be measured or quantified,” qualitative research “attempts to ‘pick up the pieces’ of the unquantifiable, personal, in depth, descriptive and social aspects of the world” (p. 8).

Denzin and Lincoln (1994) aptly noted that “qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry” (p. 4) (*see also* Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). The nature of inquiry in my research suited a qualitative approach so that the richness of the data gathered could be fully explored. A quantitative approach would not have yielded the desired results.

### **Background to this Paper**

My research started with the premise that proficiency in English influences the outcome of assessment conducted in English and that ESL (English second language) students in particular are disadvantaged by the written only assessments conducted in English. The ESL students in my study had repeatedly indicated that they cannot express themselves adequately in writing in English and that the expression of the examiners and the wording of the questions pose a problem in the written assessments. Kader Asmal (2002), the then Minister of Education in South Africa, agreed that language is a barrier and that “all our children deserve a decent education and we cannot neglect those who have been disadvantaged for so long by apartheid” (p. 1).

The tradition of written or paper-and-pencil assessments in South Africa must be viewed against the changing background of education in South Africa. The change from an apartheid system of education to one of democracy has been marked in South Africa by changes in student enrollment at institutions (where previously excluded African students now form the majority at most institutions), changes in teaching methodologies (to incorporate English second and foreign language students) and indeed some changes in assessment practices (again to accommodate English second and foreign language students). But, do these assessments resemble the “lived-in” world of the student? Because of the diversities and discrepancies in social, cultural and educational

backgrounds, the tertiary student, especially in South Africa with its tumultuous background, enters the institution with varying abilities and different “realities.” Collins, Hawkins, and Frederiksen (1993), Lave (1988), McGinn and Roth (1998), and Scribner (1986) regard paper-and-pencil tests as poor indicators for the vast array of knowledges and abilities that comprise human competence.

Lorsbach, Tobin, Briscoe, and LaMaster (1992) caution that

conventional paper and pencil tests that are used in situations where technical interests are valued have a potential problem in this regard as students are required to construct meanings without having a chance to explain what they understand as the task, clarify doubts they might have, or obtain further information relating to the task. (p. 316)

They blame this on the lack of interaction or collaboration with the educator. If students are not permitted to ask examiners or invigilators (in a written assessment) for clarity, how can the examiner be sure that a student’s failure to answer a question was a result of him or her not knowing the content? Ambiguity in the question, cultural misinterpretation of a word or poor expression on the part of the examiner could all contribute to the question being incorrectly answered by the student.

In an attempt to explore how assessment itself can contribute to equity and transformation in post-apartheid South Africa, my doctoral study introduced an oral component into the existing assessment structures. Everyday practice requires one to engage in verbal or oral as well as written discourse, I opted to include oral assessment into the present written-only scenario so that learners could be trained to function within the real world or as Lave and Wenger (1999) suggest, to move from “legitimate peripheral participation” to “full participation” in the community of discourse (p. 122). Lave and Wenger add that this move is “motivated by its location in a field of mature practice” (p. 122).

Further opting for oral assessments was to assist the students with comprehension, understanding, and expression especially within the second language environment. The South African classroom (especially at the tertiary level) is made up of students from different language, educational, cultural, social, historical, socio-economic, and demographic backgrounds. A typical classroom will have students who speak different languages or mother-tongues working within the same curriculum and using the same medium of instruction. The question to be asked is, “Does our assessment system reflect the multicultural diversity of our student population?” Gibbs, Habershaw, and Habershaw (1988) maintain that there are some students who do poorly in written tests but who have good oral skills and may display their knowledge better in *vivas*. *Vivas* are “a general non-patient based encounter between a candidate and one or more examiners” (Wakeford et al. 1995, p. 931) and they may for example constitute a case presentation or a discussion with argumentation or a group discussion. This is certainly true for many people from oral cultures and, if we are truly committed to providing multi-cultural education, “we should be assessing students in ways which are culturally fair” (Grant, 1996, p.14). Students who experience problems with communicating their responses orally can be assisted by the assessor to express their thoughts without giving them the

answers. The whole purpose of the oral is to enable the student and the assessor to talk to each other and to facilitate understanding and comprehension.

Our present assessment system requires students to be able to read and write well in English. After all, all of our lectures are delivered in English; in addition to student notes, and assessments, predominantly in the mode of writing. This means then, that if students are not competent in writing in English, they may not fare well in class or in the assessments. Deale (1975) adds that oral assessments may be particularly valuable with mixed-ability groups, where some pupils' deficiencies in skills of reading and writing may invalidate the usual methods of testing. Especially in the South African context with the legacy of apartheid, separate education systems, different standards of education and English as the popular medium of instruction at secondary and tertiary level, it is imperative that educators and legislators alike look at more flexible methods of assessment. Rennie and Parker (1991) concluded from their study that a variety of forms of written and oral communication are required to enable students to demonstrate their knowledge of subject matter and problem solving abilities (*see also* Chansarkar & Raut-Roy, 1987, p. 121).

In their comparison of oral and written assessments, Lorsch et al. (1992) agreed that "the advantage afforded by oral assessments is that the teacher and student can negotiate meaning and arrive at consensus" (p. 316) by collaboration and interaction. Greene (1989) agrees that

when we are conversing in a language we know well, we seem to be speaking our thoughts directly, presenting the contents of our arguments rather than making linguistic decisions" adding that "the purpose of talking is to say what we mean. Yet, this natural 'transparency' of language can be all too easily shattered when we attempt to express our complex thoughts on paper. (p. 144)

My study took the ESL and the EFL (English first language) students' backgrounds into account and was very mindful of the fact that in oral communication, one can draw on both the verbal and non-verbal cues of the speaker and listener. Granted that written communication can also involve non-verbal and even not-written cues, for example, the presentation of a text (typed, printed, handwritten; the care taken by the author - spelling; preparedness; punctuality, etc.). The role of non-verbal communication in written communication is not immediate, in that, the sender and the receiver of the message may not interact immediately.

In the written monologue "the motives are more abstract, more intellectualized, further removed from immediate needs" (Vygotsky, 1962, p. 99) and the communication depends on the writer's awareness of what is shared with the intended audience and must be explained. Thus, to write well a social as well as a linguistic analysis is necessary; "one must master linguistic forms and understand the relation of one's own perspective to others" (Finlay & Faith, 1987, p. 64). This is further expounded by Elasser and John-Steiner (1987) who said that, in written communication, "the writer lacks the immediate clues of audience response - facial expressions, sounds, pitch and intonation - all of which are characteristic of oral dialogue" (p. 48). This then, is the crux of the problem for me, as far as written only assessments is concerned. After all, we should be

testing the student's understanding of the content so the comprehension of the question should not be made a hurdle for the student. We should be interested in students' knowledge of their subject or content, and their ability to apply that knowledge in real life and not in how well students can express themselves in the language of the assessment. Yes, students must be able to put their points or thoughts across in English, but their presentation skills in English should not be the focus of the assessment as this will definitely disadvantage the ESL student. Rennie and Parker (1991) agreed that "assessment procedures are invalid if they fail to elicit knowledge from the students who in fact possess the knowledge" (p. 56). Students should not be prevented from demonstrating their knowledge of the content simply because of their weakness firstly in the language of assessment and secondly, in the mode of assessment.

Devising a system of oral assessment for the South African tertiary context was no easy task. A survey of South African and international institutions as well as literature searches did not reveal any particular method or model that was highly successful or that was used by many institutions. In fact, what I did find was that assessment practices varied from one institution to the next and indeed from one country to the next. I had to devise a system using the information that I had gathered and by drawing on my own experience with second language teaching. This meant that flaws and merits in the system would only become apparent after it was trialled with students. Oral assessments in my study were therefore conducted using an action research methodology which suited my research objectives as I could devise a system, trial it with the students and assessors, address shortcomings that arose from analyses of the questionnaires and focus group discussions after each round of the assessments, build on strengths, and re-plan for the next set of assessments.

My research did not follow a traditional or conventional model of action research as I did not seek to test out a "solution" to a problem with my own class, but rather a problem in my community as a teacher. My study drew on the common elements shared by the models of Calhoun (1994), Kemmis (1990), Lewin (1946), Sagor (1992), Stringer (1996) and Wells (1994) as explained by Mills (2000). The area of focus was identified and a system of assessment was devised and employed. This was followed by collection of data in the form of questionnaires, focus group discussions and the assessment sessions themselves. This data was analyzed, interpreted and action was taken to overcome the shortcomings noted. This then, spiralled us back into the process again where the structure of the assessments was refined each time by addressing the comments, concerns and criticisms of the participants until a structure and method of assessment was arrived at to the satisfaction of all the participants. The term spiral is used because in each round of the assessments, we had to go back to the drawing board as it were, start all over again and work our way to the top. Each of the different aspects (for example, the format of questions posed, number of candidates per session, time allocation, structure of the assessments) that needed redress had to be carefully examined and the necessary measures put into place. This revised method then had to be tested after the required action had been taken. Data were then collected, collated, and analysed which enabled critique of the method employed, and thus began the next phase.

The assessments were conducted in three phases. Two rounds of individual and one round of group oral assessments were conducted with undergraduate students at two tertiary institutions, namely a technikon and a university, in Durban, South Africa. Both

are tertiary institutions where English is the medium of instruction. The university places emphasis on the professional aspects of one's career, awarding degrees to students while the technikon places emphasis on the technical and vocational aspects of one's career, awarding certificates and diplomas to students; consequently, the entrance requirements and the nature of the courses offered are different. The three rounds of assessments were as follows.

The first round of the assessments (round one), which constituted the individual oral assessments, were conducted at the University of Natal, Durban in the School of Life and Environmental Sciences. The subjects assessed were microbiology and health, plant biochemistry, animal ecophysiology, and plant physiology.

The second round of the individual oral assessments (round two) was conducted at the ML Sultan Technikon, Durban in the Departments of Health Sciences and Medical Sciences. The subjects assessed in round two were microbiology, air pollution, epidemiology, and environmental pollution.

The third round of the assessments (round three) constituted group oral assessments as the participants were satisfied with the format of the individual oral assessments. The group oral assessment route was explored as a means of assessing more students in less time. These group oral assessments were conducted at the ML Sultan Technikon, Durban in the Department of Health Sciences. The subjects assessed were community development and occupational health and safety. These students and assessors had also participated in rounds one and two of the assessments.

This first round of the assessments adapted oral assessment practices used by South African and international Science educators and adopted an open structure which meant that specific time frames for each segment of assessment were not adhered to and questions were drawn at random and therefore not standardized for all students. Shortcomings were noted by using questionnaires and focus group discussion with students and assessors after each phase of assessment. Each of the criticisms raised were addressed in round two of the assessments. Criticisms raised included: the time allocation which varied for students, the random selection of questions from a question bank, the exclusively oral format of the assessments where students were not given the question in writing, neither were they allowed to write anything down, and they were not given time to plan answers, revisit or correct answers that they were not completely happy with

In the second round, assessors compiled two sets of questions because the assessments were divided into two sessions. The assessors compiled one set of questions per session, which meant that all students in the session were asked the same questions. Each student was allocated ten minutes which was divided as follows: two minutes to prepare a response to the questions, six minutes to answer the questions in any order that they preferred, two minutes to recap or come back to any questions that they had experienced problems with, wanted to elaborate on, or wanted to change an answer. Students could also use the last two minutes to pose questions to the examiners. During the last two minutes of recap, the following candidate was given his/her question and thus



began the next student's preparation time. Questions were typed and handed to the students. Students were given writing material to plan and prepare their responses. After each round of the assessments, feedback from the participants was analysed and comments and criticisms were addressed.

In keeping with the mixed-mode (oral and written in combination) of assessments, questionnaires and focus group discussions were used to gather data about the assessments. Focus group discussions were held with the examiners, co-examiners, and students in my study in addition to the questionnaires to "make observations about individual experiences, feelings, attitudes, perceptions, and thinking, using open-ended techniques of enquiry" (Brodigan, 1992, p. 1). It was also aimed at assisting the participants to talk by minimising the possibility of misunderstanding and being misunderstood.

### **The Focus Group Discussions**

Focus groups have been used successfully in medicine (Morgan & Spanish, 1984), in market research (Morgan & Krueger, 1998), in media (Gamson, 1998; Just et al., 1996; Morley & Brunson, 1999) and in 1998, Morgan and Krueger collaborated academic with applied work in academic social science. Success with focus groups in educational research was achieved by Dehne, Brodigan, and Topping (1990), Griffith and Kile (1986a, 1986b) and Waters-Adams and Nias (2003).

A focus group is a small group interview on a specific topic (Linville, Lambert-Shute, Fruhauf, & Piercy, 2003, p. 211). My own use of focus groups grew out of a need to gauge the feelings of the participants about mixed-mode assessment, and especially the individual and group oral assessments. After all, the best way to learn about student problems is to ask the students themselves. As van Schoor and Lovemore (1995) explain, "obtaining students' perceptions of the teaching and learning process is not merely an option anymore. The emphasis on meeting the needs of the users makes this a necessity" (p.7). Since the participants, and especially the students, came from different backgrounds and proficiencies in English, the focus group method was chosen because they are based on the "therapeutic assumption that people who share a common problem will be more willing to talk amid the security of others with the same problem" (Lederman, 1990, p. 117). Suter (2000) also found that "unlike other methods of data collection, focus group interviewing created conversational groups that, in turn, facilitated participant observation-like understandings" (p. 2).

Fontana and Frey (1994) agreed that "group interviews can also be used for triangulation purposes or employed in conjunction with other data gathering techniques" (p. 365). I also hoped that the data from the focus groups triangulated with the data collected from the assessments and the questionnaires would help foster a better understanding of what went well in the assessments and what needed revision. To this extent, focus groups were lead by myself as facilitator. As a member of the academic staff at the ML Sultan Technikon and an external examiner at the university, I was cautious about any form of bias influencing my analyses of the discussions. But, I did not lecture any Science or Health Science students and was therefore at ease that there would be no prejudice or favouritism. I did suggest that a student should be elected to facilitate each discussion, so that any form of cultural bias would be removed, but students were

unanimous that they had interacted sufficiently with me to talk without fear of victimisation. Also, the fact that I did not lecture them in any of their subjects assured them that they had “nothing to lose.”

Morgan and Spanish (1984) regard the strength of focus groups as coming from a “compromise between the strengths found in other qualitative methods” like participant observation and in-depth interviewing, adding that “they allow access to a process that qualitative researchers are often centrally interested in: interaction” (p. 260). Melles (2004) and Hutchby and Wooffitt (1998) caution that Western interview conventions are culturally specific and need to be considered when working with students of a different culture. Melles adds that “focus groups have been used as a complement to surveys for course evaluation to explore reasons behind quantitative responses” (p. 221) (*see also* Bloor, 2001; Dreachslin, 1999; Wall, 2001). Linville et al. (2003) agrees that “focus groups have certain advantages that other participatory methods may not. Because the students give feedback in a group, they can build upon each other’s answers ... and evaluators can gather a lot of information in a short time” (p. 211). Although “groupthink” (where people may tend to say or agree with what others say, without being critical), may be regarded as a weakness in focus groups, I did not find this in the discussions that I conducted. The participants were eager to talk about their individual experiences with the assessments as it was a new form of assessment. Granted, they did agree or some did tag on to what others were saying, but I asked them to elaborate or qualify their responses when they did so. Participants were enthusiastic to share their thoughts and experiences because as one student said, “this [discussion] will help to shape our assessments in the future.” Unlike one-to-one interviews, group discussion substitutes for the directive questioning which is part of most other approaches to the task of gathering information (Brodigan, 1992, p. 1) and “the group potentially provides a safe atmosphere, a context in which the synergy can generate more than the sum of individual inputs” (Lederman, 1990, p. 119).

To maximize the pool of information gathered from the discussions, a semi-structured method was used which as the name suggests, allowed for part of the discussion to be structured (where I asked questions from a prepared list) and for the other part to be determined by the flow of the discussion or the responses of the participants. Schlebusch (2002) describes the semi-structured interview as an interview where “structured questions” can be “followed up with unstructured, probing questions” (p. 2). The focus group discussions were therefore made up of prepared questions (which the assessors had to agree upon) and sub-questions which were prompted by the responses of the participants. This method allowed us to explore and expand on comments made, issues raised or controversies that arose. The semi-structured method allowed the discussion to come to life--it afforded us the opportunity to really talk to each other.

Thirteen focus groups were conducted with the students and two with the assessors. Students and assessors were grouped separately so that participants would be free to speak without fear of victimization (on the part of the students). Assessors too would be free to express themselves without having to fear that they may offend students or give away any information that students should not be privy to. Students were asked to group themselves so that they would be comfortable with their peers and they would feel free to talk. As Lederman (1990) explained, “the presence of people of like-mind” makes

it “easier for otherwise shy people to talk about their personal thoughts, feelings and experiences” (p. 119). The groups were made up of a maximum of ten students each to enable me to talk individually with each student and as Brodigan (1992) stated, “focus groups can produce desirable results when sizes vary between 4 and 12 participants” (p. 5).

The duration of the group discussions fluctuated between 60 and 80 minutes depending on the number of students in the group and also on some groups being more responsive than others.

### **Procedure Used for the Focus Group Discussions**

The assessors and I collaborated on the questions to be asked of the students during the focus group discussions. I initially drew up eight questions and then consulted with the assessors, inviting comments from them and asking them whether they would like to add any questions related to any issues on which they wanted feedback. After a few meetings, we settled on twelve questions for the students. I used the responses from the student focus group discussions to guide my questions asked of the assessors during their focus groups. A list of eight questions was drawn up for the assessor focus groups. The semi-structured focus group interview method allowed me to ask the questions on the prepared list and then ask sub-questions or related questions that arose from the student and assessor focus group discussions.

Prior to the commencement of my research, I applied for and was granted ethical clearance to conduct my research using students in the identified departments both at the university and the technikon by their respective Research Departments. To encourage free and candid participation, participants were assured that their names would not be used in any way either in my correspondence with their lecturers or departments or in the write-up of my findings. In a written undertaking to the students I explained that they would be guaranteed confidentiality in terms of their responses or contributions in the focus group discussions and the questionnaires. When quoting students during my write-up, I used pseudonyms. During the focus group discussions and on the questionnaires, students and assessors were not asked to identify themselves. Assessors too were quoted anonymously. Students were sceptical at the beginning because they were told that the discussions would be recorded and they felt that they would be identified by their voices. Again students had to be reassured that only I would be listening to the tapes. Student permission to audio-tape the discussions was received in writing at the commencement of the project. In each of the sessions, it was clear that participants were acutely aware of the recorder at the beginning of the discussion and would actually speak to it, by looking at the recorder. As the discussion grew and other respondents began to participate, they became less aware of the fact that the discussion was being recorded.

The format of the discussions was kept simple. As a facilitator, I posed a question to a member of the group and this inevitably led to contributions from the others. As Lederman (1990) so rightly said, the exchange of ideas in the group stimulates new thoughts which may never be mentioned in individual interviewing. Participants feel free to express their thoughts and feelings as they know that they can depend upon their peers for support. They tack on to what someone in the group says and discussion ensues. Even

negative thoughts are easier to express when in the security of a group. Of course there is the possibility that group members may be reluctant to speak for fear of others listening and perhaps mocking them or for fear that confidentiality may be breached. The role of the facilitator is therefore critical in a focus group, where quieter participants have to be drawn out and members must be told at the outset that they must commit to keeping the confidentiality of the comments made in the group.

Although the use of video-recording equipment would have yielded a wealth of information (Penn-Edwards, 2004) as far as the participants' non-verbal reactions were concerned, I decided against it, because the participants had clearly demonstrated their trust in me and I did not want to intimidate them or violate this trust by creating an atmosphere that would induce performance and artificiality on their part. Also, video evidence cannot by any means be regarded as anonymous. The assessors were resistant to the idea of being filmed but did not mind the audio-recording.

## **Discussion**

My purpose with this article is not to report on the level of knowledge they developed in their courses as revealed by the evaluation/assessment methods. Rather, my objective is to focus on the unexpected rewards of conducting qualitative research. A bonus of using qualitative research methodology was the insights that assessors and students gained from their participation in this study. They could talk about and share their experiences. The focus group discussions revealed information that benefited all the participants, that is, the assessors, the students and myself as participant observer in the oral assessments and as facilitator in the discussions.

### **A Learning Opportunity**

Assessors were elated that the oral assessments "provide a good learning opportunity for the student." Students were unanimous that they learnt more about the subject matter from the oral assessments than they did from the written assessments. Otto (1993) and Scholten (2004) agree that the oral exams are a very useful method of teaching and testing. Butler and Wiseman's (1993) questionnaire also revealed that students believed that "doing a viva improved their understanding of the material covered" and they also felt that an assignment on the same material "would not have provided as broad an understanding" (p. 345). A *viva* is "a general non-patient based encounter between a candidate and one or more examiners" (Wakeford, Southgate, & Wass, 1995, p. 931) and it may, for example, constitute a case presentation, a discussion with argumentation or a group discussion.

Students said that they "definitely learned more about the topic by listening to my lecturer and my friends." The continual discussions offered different perspectives on the same issues or problems, and the different methods of resolving them, led to good learning for the students. Students added that "the lecturer's response to questions helped me to learn what was the correct answer."

Holland (2001) added that if students are "encouraged to analyse other people's work as a developmental strategy for improving their own work" (p. 6) then being assessed with peers is good. After all, that is what the group oral encourages, for students

to assess each others' work not for the purpose of assigning grades but as a learning strategy. The mere fact that they are present while their peers are engaged in conversation with their lecturer about some content in science means that the student will listen to, interpret and analyse what has been said. They will also listen to the immediate feedback from the examiner which will further guide their analyses of the others' responses. The assessor, by virtue of the continual interaction, corrected student responses if necessary or pointed them in the right direction. This ensured that the students learned the correct information. The students therefore have the opportunity to learn from each other, from their assessor, and from the discussions that ensue unlike in the written assessment where the students write down their answers (privately) and submit their papers for grading which in all probability will be done privately (by one marker). Discussion of a written paper after marking does not always take place in class, so if there is no feedback, whether written or verbal from the assessor, it is virtually a lost learning experience.

The benefit of learning during the oral assessment also permeates to the passive observer. Just by sitting in on the different oral assessment sessions, I too learned about the subject matter in the various courses. This was a real bonus as the discussions were not only enlightening but also very interesting and I found myself looking forward to the following session not only for the purposes of my research but because I was keen to learn more about the subject. In fact, after listening to a few candidates' assessment in each session, I understood the section sufficiently to determine whether the subsequent candidates' responses were correct. If the oral assessments could teach me (whose only experience with science is restricted to science subjects studied at secondary school many years ago) the benefits to students currently studying the course (and perhaps just out of secondary school) must be remarkable.

Assessors were pleasantly surprised about the evaluation of themselves of the different courses taught by them in their respective fields. Assessors usually only get this kind of information from student evaluations which students sometimes fill out without even understanding (the written message) exactly what is being asked of them. One assessor said,

... It also allows the examiner to learn about his or her teaching methods. The lecturer is alerted to sections that were poorly taught or misunderstood. The lecturer can then change his or her approach to these sections.

Another assessor commented that "the students' responses give me a clue as to how they learn and whether they have understood the lesson in class." Glynn, Muth, and Britton (1990) add that

the student's prior knowledge, expectations, and preconceptions determine what information will be selected out for attention. What they attend to determines what they learn. As a result, no two students learn exactly the same thing when they listen to a lesson, observe a demonstration, read a textbook, or do a laboratory activity. (pp. 5-6)

The oral assessment by virtue of their interactive nature allows the assessors insight into how students learn. McNiff (1988) agrees that “students can be the most critical and also the most rewarding of monitors” (p. 84). Although lecturers often ask their students whether they have understood the lesson, the reactions may not reflect the true state of understanding among the students. Educators often rely on the quality assurance mechanisms at their institution coupled with student feedback questionnaires to inform them about their teaching methods and styles. But, these mechanisms only give a very general picture of the scenario. The interaction during the orals enables the examiners to draw conclusions based on their interaction with each of their students. This is a very concrete way to critique one’s method/style of teaching. The educator can then make the necessary adjustments for the benefit of the students. Sometimes a whole section may need to be re-taught if it becomes apparent during the oral sessions that this section was very poorly understood by the majority of the students, or the lecturer can elect to teach the section to the group that they did not understand.

### **Anonymity versus Face-to-face Interaction**

Final written examinations at tertiary level in South Africa as well as the matric or grade 12 examinations offer anonymity to the student in the belief that this will protect the student from assessor bias. This question of anonymity versus face-to-face interaction was posed to the assessors. In response to the question on the effect of the examiners’ knowledge of the student in relation to the score given, some said their knowledge of a student had no effect on the assessment, while others responded that it helped them to draw out the quieter students and get them to participate, answer, and to challenge the students who knew their content to think deeper. The anonymity afforded by the written assessments helped to ensure that examiners were not biased in their marking of the scripts, that is, they would not favour one student over another because the students were not identifiable. But the assessors also felt that this anonymity worked against the students as well. Students who had a poor command of English were assessed in the same way as their peers who were very proficient in English. In other words, no help or consideration was given to these students who perhaps knew their content but could just not express themselves adequately in English. Also, examiners could not tell whether students had misunderstood the question or just simply not studied for their test. Examiners were adamant that

in the written examination, the students can only be assessed on what they have written on the script but in the oral, the examiner can assist the students to understand the question, allow them to restructure their answers by providing helpful cues to ensure that students do not go off at a tangent giving unrelated information to a question.

Seddon and Paopaioannou (1990) agree that in both the oral and written formats, “the assessment of both forms of answer may not be determined solely by the level of knowledge or degree of understanding. In each format, it may be determined also by the student’s ability to understand the question and communicate the answer” (p. 2) (*see also*

Paopaioannou, 1989). The face-to-face interaction in the oral allows the examiner to elicit appropriate responses from the student.

When asked to compare anonymity in the written assessment to face-to-face interaction in the oral assessment, assessors at the university responded that

It is easier to guide the student in the right direction in the orals,” and that “although the written assessments are theoretically fair to the students, it could be to their disadvantage as the examiner cannot take any extenuating circumstances into account.

Assessors at the technikon felt that in the oral,

one can support nervous students.” They added that “the orals give you a different perspective on your students, particularly in their ability to articulate and present arguments. In the written, “I see the work and the student separately, this disadvantages students who don’t have good English skills.

This contrasts sharply with the view that ESL students in particular are at a disadvantage in oral assessment because of their poor English and therefore presentation skills. One generally assumes that because an oral format of testing is being used, that students who cannot articulate their thoughts clearly would be disadvantaged. This was also the concern raised by Holland (2001, p. 4) who asked whether “ethnic minority students are rewarded more in anonymised systems of assessment.” One of the assessors said though that because her “classes are small” she can recognize students handwriting “so there’s no anonymity and therefore no difference between the oral and the written.”

Comparing the effect of anonymity in the written assessment to the lack thereof in the oral, it is apparent from the results of this survey, that anonymity does not really benefit the student, and especially the student with poor English skills. The statement made by 20 percent of the examiners that anonymity leads to objectivity is supported by Brown, Bull, and Pendlebury (1997) who say that “anonymous marking is increasingly fashionable on the grounds that it minimises the effects of previous knowledge of the student’s performance. It reduces the effects of stereotyping, halo effects and prejudice” (pp. 234-235), but the point about disadvantaging students who “don’t have good English skills” is very relevant in the present South African educational scenario. Goodwin and MacDonald (1997) agree that authentic assessment of what a person thinks, feels, knows and is able to do is unreliable when the language of assessment is different from the language of the person under assessment. So, assessing all students alike, without taking into account the proficiency of the student in the language of assessment could have far reaching negative effects for the student who is not proficient in English. Being able to talk to the students and assessors about their experiences made them realise the benefits of being able to identify a student in an examination. Assessors and students alike have accepted that written examinations are here to stay, but the discussions highlighted the benefits of face-to-face interaction with the students.

### **Homogenous or Heterogeneous Groups?**

A common concern among assessors during group work or group assessments is how to combine students. Should the groups be homogenous or should they be mixed? If the latter, how should the groups be made up? Assessors are wary of being biased in their grouping of students. Firstly, because they could be accused of favouritism and secondly because of the different results that the group make-up could yield. They also realise that this issue could lead to tension or friction and therefore do not ask students to air their views on this issue. I did pose this question of group make-up to the students and 90 percent of the students favoured being tested in a group rather than being assessed individually. This 90 percent included all the ESL students in the sample. Respondents cited the fact that they could “support each morally and assist each other.” Students agreed that “if a question is posed and you don’t answer and no one else in the group knows the answer, there is no pressure on you. Nobody points at you.” The group setting allowed candidates to reflect on their responses, add to their peers’ answers and verify comments made. Students felt that if they were in a group, they would be “confronting” the examiner/s collectively and not as individuals. They therefore felt “protected” in the group setting.

Ten percent of the EFL students preferred individual assessments to the group orals because

some students in the group talk too much and others don’t get a chance to say everything they want” and “I felt I had to answer quickly because the others were just beating about the bush instead of getting to the point and answering the question.

These EFL students wanted to get more “talk time” as they felt that their contributions were more “to the point” whereas the ESL students were just “wasting time with trying to express their answers in English.” An examination of the assessment rosters revealed that these EFL students had not filled in the assessment roster because they did not attend lectures on a regular basis. They were therefore unaware that they had to choose their own assessment groups. They were then assigned to a group formed by their lecturer. It is therefore likely that these students were peeved about not being assessed with their fellow EFL peers as they felt alienated within the group that they found themselves.

Other reasons forwarded were “the weak students can lower your marks,” “they will wait for you to answer, so they can hang on to your answer and make it their own,” or “they might give foolish or hilarious answers and you end up looking stupid.” These students were obviously afraid that one mark was being assigned to the group as a whole. Although they were explicitly told that each candidate would be scored individually, students who did not attend classes were unsure as to how this would be practically implemented. They just assumed that because they were part of a group that the contribution of the others would reflect on their performance and “influence the judgement of the examiners.”

Homogeneity of the groups was also cited by some of the students as being an important factor in deciding group make-up. Students who classified themselves as EFL



students, wanted to be assessed together because they did not want to “be held back by poor English speakers.” The students that classified themselves as ESL wanted to be assessed together so that they could “commit language errors” without being “mocked or laughed at” and they could “support each other during the orals.”

A group of five male students jested that they too preferred to be assessed in a homogenous group because they did not want the females to be present when they “could not answer the questions.” “They will think we are dumb and they will not go out with us” said one student. Ten African female students preferred to be assessed in a group of African females only as they come from a patriarchal society and they felt “awkward” and “overshadowed” by the males. They did not “feel comfortable participating in a group discussion with them” and did not want them present at their assessment sessions. Rockhill (1994) also noted the “male/female differences in everyday communicative practices” which are “constructed culturally and socially” (p. 245). The cultural beliefs and practices of our students affect the ways in which they socialise and the ways in which they interact in the classroom. These are important considerations that need to be taken into account in a multicultural classroom, but can only be done if there is communication and understanding of these practices by the educators. The discussions brought to light some of the customs of the students and the assessors realised that

we should not be looking at them through Western eyes. They are individuals from diverse cultures and whether we like it or not, they will practice what they believe. We need to know what those beliefs are.” To which another assessor added “and I always thought that the African female students are just shy. Little did I realise that they were just carrying forward their roles at home, I mean, where the man is the head of the household. I was surprised at their contributions in the discussions.

The discussions about homogeneity and heterogeneity of the groups revealed more information than the assessors and I expected. We learned about cultural beliefs and about the feelings of our students which we were not privy to with our traditional written assessments. A quantitative analysis would have given useful statistics but would not have given us the kind of information we did get from the discussions.

### **Relating Theory to Practice**

Assessors were able to learn from their students and students were able to learn from their assessors. They were not mere spectators in a class; they were now participants in the whole learning process. They wanted to learn about how the theories relate to their daily lives. This became apparent during my observation of an oral session as indicated in the following excerpt:

During an Air Pollution oral, following on questions pertaining to legislation in the southern basin, Rakesh (not his real name), a student who lives in Merebank (in the southern basin) asked, “what is being done presently in terms of air pollution legislation in the southern basin?” The assessor answered briefly and then reminded students that he would discuss this topic further in class the

following week and directed them to “read the newspaper articles that I’ve placed on reserve so that we can have a good discussion in class next week.” One student said,

I have often wondered about questions after we did a lecture in class, but I could not ask the lecturer because our class is too big and I am afraid to stand up and ask a personal question, I mean, ask about something that only I am thinking about.

But, when the practical questions were asked during the oral assessments, the other students were very keen to hear the lecturer’s response.

As Roth (1994) said, “as students pursue these questions of their own interest, they not only learn to gain pleasure from inquiry, they also gain ownership over problems and solutions” (p. 216) (*see also* Lave, 1988). There were fruitful discussions between students and examiners and often between the students themselves. The lecturer had to tell students that they would continue the discussion in their next lecture. A student commented, “it makes more sense like this, when we can link up our lectures with what we see on the news. It is so important to help us in our daily living.” As Killen (2001) says, “productive teaching occurs when students learn useful things.” The learning then was not just confined to what transpired during lectures, but students were excited that “lessons” could be learned for “practical application” in their lives, or as Lave (1988) and Lave and Wenger (1999) refer to as “situated learning.” When students can see the relevance of learned material in their “community of practice” they may value the learning more because they know that the knowledge constructed can be applied to solve problems or address situations in their everyday lives. They felt that the orals enabled them to “bridge the gap” between the classroom and the real world.

A quantitative analysis of the oral assessment procedure would not have been as effective in unearthing the above findings. A qualitative analysis of the procedure revealed information about learning and relating theory to practice that educators may not have realised. One assessor confirmed this by saying,

but that is how we teach. We cover the theory and students must then go to the library and read more. At tertiary level, they should be able to see the relevance of what we’re doing in class. Clearly we need to do things differently now. Actually, I can now bring in more media and prac into my classroom. Mind, that could be very interesting. We do learn everyday, don’t we?

### **Improved Relationships**

The focus group discussions also unveiled new insights about student and lecturer/assessor relationships. The informal nature of the assessments did not only allow the students to relax or to reduce anxiety levels, it also produced the added benefit of leading to improved relationships between students and assessors. They were able to chat to each other face-to-face on an individual basis, something they “do not get the opportunity to do in our large classes” because “our large mixed ability classes do not

allow us to treat our students as individuals, but the oral allowed me to conduct private assessments with each of my students. It was a real eye-opener and fun too!" Assessors welcomed the interpersonal benefits that they derived from the oral assessments (*see* Nelson, 1986). In the course of everyday lectures, especially in large classes, students and lecturers do not get the opportunity to interact on a personal level with each other unless there is a query or a problem to be discussed. The oral assessment (whether one-on-one or in a group setting) enables direct interaction and therefore dialogue between the assessor and the student. The student and assessor may come to regard each other differently after the conversation afforded to them by the oral assessment situation. As Nelson so rightly said, "the most unexpected result of holding oral exams is an improved relationship with students as individuals. After all, how else would you ever find time to chat [privately] with each and every individual you teach?" (p. 70).

Also, when assessors were trying to get students to relax, they chatted about sports, programmes on television and other general topics of interest. Students were elated that they could "chat" to their lecturers "as a person." Students and assessors came to regard each other differently after the orals, they had established rapport. The orals they all agreed, led to "improved relationships" where students came to regard their lecturers as "people we can talk to" and lecturers "understood our students better." For some of the assessors, the oral assessments were the first time that they heard some of their students speak. Students may be intimidated in the large class set-up for various reasons and "since our hectic schedules and large classes do not allow us to interact with each of our students on an individual basis, we have never heard some of our students speak." Interactions during the oral assessments

were a real eye-opener. I mean, just because a student doesn't answer or ask questions in class, doesn't mean that he doesn't know his stuff, it simply means that he does not want to talk in a room of two hundred strangers! I was really impressed with some of my students. I would not have been aware of the range of talents in my class had it not been for the orals.

It was no wonder then that assessors suggested that the time for the oral assessments should be lengthened. Since the length of time that oral assessments take has often been cited as a disadvantage of conducting oral assessments, I was surprised when the assessors suggested that the duration of oral assessments be increased. "In the written, all we test is the ability to remember. It is through talking that one can appreciate the depth of knowledge that a student possesses. Like good conversation, orals definitely require more time."

The interaction provided by the group orals is wonderful. The students are communicating with each other and the examiner. There is a lot of dynamism at play. To get the most out of this, more time would have to be devoted to the orals.

Students were grateful that they were regarded as individuals and not just treated as a number in a large class. They were able to express their views and "made to feel

important.” They valued the discussions because “normally we are not asked to talk about how we feel, whether we approve, or whether we think something is good or not.” For this reason, the questionnaires administered to the participants included many open-ended questions. Although quantitative data was required, the qualitative data in the form of reasons, motivations and substantiations behind the figures were an invaluable part of the study.

### **Conclusion**

While the relevance of quantitative research in the sciences is not even being questioned, using a qualitative approach in this study facilitated the sharing of anecdotes from students and assessors thereby giving authenticity to the findings. The focus group discussions allowed assessors insights into their students’ world, insights that would enrich student-lecturer/assessor relationships. Students valued the personal interaction with their lecturers/assessors and found “new connections” with them.

The action research methodology used, allowed me to refine the assessments and also promoted collaboration between all the participants. The assessors and students were able to interact more closely. This interaction is normally lacking in the day-to-day operation of the institution, especially with large class sizes and with each being caught up with the business of the day, lecturing, assessing or researching. Students also collaborated with each other. As researcher, I, too, collaborated with the students and the assessors. Assessors were pleased that they got to know their students better. Students were grateful for the “personal interaction” with their lecturers. Assessors were able to talk to their students, reflect on their practices and improve or make provisions to accommodate shortcomings noted. They said that they “learned a lot by talking to them as individuals.” Students learned more about each other and felt that “at least now we had a chance to speak to each other” and to “get to know a little more about each other.” Using an action research methodology also allowed students and assessors to reflect on their practices. Assessors reflected on their methods of teaching, assessing and interacting with students and colleagues. Students reflected on their learning habits and the real purpose of educating themselves. They, too, reflected on their relationships with their colleagues and their lecturers. Coupled with a qualitative approach, action research promoted dialogue and reflection to the benefit of all the participants and myself as researcher.

Using a qualitative approach allowed participants to share their experiences with the others, so it was not just a number crunching exercise, but real thoughts and feelings behind the statistics that were revealed. Lessons were learned not only about the assessments conducted but about the human factor that shapes these assessments. These lessons will serve to inform classroom practice as well. As one assessor said,

clearly there is a need for us to engage with our students more. I have always felt very strongly about quantitative research in the sciences, but I must say, your research has opened up a new door for me. Hmmm, qualitative research in the sciences, that is a very interesting and relevant take!

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### Author Note

Penny Singh is a senior lecturer in the Department of English and Communication at the Durban University of Technology in Durban, South Africa. His work address is Penny Singh, Department of English and Communication; ME3-5, MLS Campus, Durban University of Technology, PO Box 1334, Durban, 4000, South Africa. Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to PO Box 65226, Reservoir



Hills, 4090, Durban, South Africa; Telephone: 27827064642; Fax: 2731 3732290; Email: pennysin@dut.ac.za

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